



THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE
1000 DEFENSE PENTAGON
WASHINGTON, DC 20301-1000

December 3, 1999

The President
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Since receiving the report of the Special Panel on Military Operations on Vieques (also known as the Rush Panel), I have reviewed its recommendations in detail and considered the matter carefully. I believe that discussions over the past several weeks have been productive in suggesting steps that may advance our two primary goals: ensuring the readiness of our Navy and Marine Corps and improving the well-being of the people of Vieques.

My most important responsibility as Secretary of Defense is to ensure that American military forces are well trained and ready for the dangerous missions we routinely ask them to perform. It is in this context that I have assessed the real and immediate significance the Vieques Training Range has for the combat readiness of Atlantic Fleet Navy and Marine Corps units. As you and I discussed recently, two of the last three carrier battle groups to deploy were involved in combat operations on their first day in theatre. This underscores the importance of keeping our readiness at the highest possible level. As stated by the five warfighting CINCs and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, using the Vieques Training Range is a vital part of training our combat forces.

I also firmly believe that all US citizens, whether they live in states or other jurisdictions, must make sacrifices in order to support the strong national defense that preserves the freedoms we all enjoy. There is not a single part of our country that doesn't make some adjustments or accommodations to sustain the presence of the military.

Having said that, it is clear from the panel's report that the US citizens on Vieques have serious concerns that merit the full attention of both the Department of the Navy and the Department of Defense. You have my personal commitment that we will take all possible steps to improve our stewardship and repair the relationships on Vieques.

The Department of Defense and the Department of the Navy have developed a plan about which you have had productive discussions with the Governor of Puerto Rico. Under this plan, I believe it will be possible for the Navy and Marine Corps to resume training at Vieques if a) that training is limited to inert weapons unless and until a resumption of live fire training is agreed to by the people of Vieques and the Navy; b) the training is reduced from the 180 days per year presently used to 90 per year; c) within five years of the resumption of training on Vieques, the Navy will develop an alternative to that training and all training on the island will terminate unless otherwise agreed by the people of Vieques and the Navy; and d) the training is accompanied by a vigorous community development and economic adjustment program that recognizes and offsets the burdens that the training imposes on the people of Vieques. (A draft of the economic program that could be enacted upon continuous restoration of adequate use of this range is attached to this letter.)

Live fire training remains a requirement to assure the highest level of readiness of our forces. The Navy and Marine Corps may seek to obtain the agreement of the people of Vieques to its restoration -- recognizing that they first would have to make significant and concrete improvements in their relationship with Vieques for the people of Vieques to consider any changes in the nature of the training. If, however, inert ordnance were to be used on Vieques, the Navy and Marine Corps would need to obtain live fire training in other locations in order to deploy at a satisfactory level of combat readiness. This approach would not provide the unique type of coordinated training that Vieques offers, but it would prepare our forces for combat in a satisfactory manner.

While we have succeeded in developing this broad framework of agreement, after consulting with senior law enforcement officials, it is nonetheless clear that continued uncertainty over range security stands in the way of guaranteeing access to Vieques for the EISENHOWER Battle Group and the WASP Amphibious Ready Group. There currently is no comparable alternative to the use of Vieques. Accordingly, in the present security

environment, we have directed the groups to accomplish further training off the East Coast of the United States and I am working with senior Naval officials to secure necessary commitments from our allies to accommodate further live fire training and readiness certification for the EISENHOWER Battle Group and the WASP Amphibious Ready Group before undertaking combat operations. The groups will deploy to the combat zone only after the satisfactory substitute combat training is arranged.

To provide time for eliminating the remaining impediments to our return and to allow the people of Vieques themselves to evaluate this understanding, I propose that training described above not resume on Vieques until next spring when it will be required for the GEORGE WASHINGTON Battle Group and the KEARSARGE Amphibious Ready Group. In the intervening period, I recommend that discussions continue in Puerto Rico on our plan, and that next week, a Navy-Vieques consultation group meet with RADM Kevin Green, the newly appointed senior Naval representative to Puerto Rico. The focus of this group will be to discuss with the people of Vieques the implementation of our plan, develop processes for consultation between the Navy and the people of Vieques about Naval activities on Vieques, and to establish a forum that may improve relations between the Navy and the people of the island.

I hope the above steps will create an environment in which the vital training of our armed forces can resume on Vieques. I will see that DoD and the Navy make good on our commitments. Obviously, however, our framework of agreement will be impossible to implement if we are prevented from using the range for the training of the GEORGE WASHINGTON Battle Group, the KEARSARGE Amphibious Ready Group, and subsequent groups. I should also note that I have been advised by both the Chief of Naval Operations and the Commandant of the Marine Corps that the end of training on Vieques would require a total reassessment of the other military activities in Puerto Rico. I am hopeful, however, that conditions will exist to support our long-term presence.

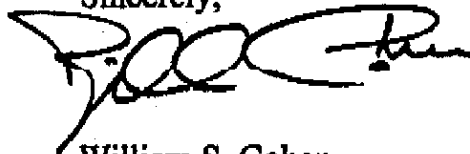
Mr. President, I am proud to note the brave and historic service to our nation by citizens from Puerto Rico. In Korea, for example, Puerto Ricans served with particular distinction and sacrifice. The legendary 65th Infantry Regiment alone had 743 soldiers killed in action. Members received 134 Silver Stars, 8 Distinguished Service Crosses, and Marine Corps Private

Fernando Luis Garcia gave his life and received the Medal of Honor. In Vietnam, Army Private First Class Carlos Lozada from Caguas, Specialist 4th Class Hector Santiago-Colon from Salinas, and Capt. Euripides Rubio from Ponce were posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. The heroism of these men and the thousands of other citizens from Puerto Rico who have defended our nation stands as an indisputable testament to the patriotism of Puerto Rico.

By the same token, Mr. President, at this time nearly 40,000 citizens from Puerto Rico wear the uniform of our country in both active duty and reserve capacities. For them, and for all of our forces, we must ensure that our troops are properly trained to meet the very dangerous challenges we ask them to face each day.

Thank you for your considerable efforts to resolve this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W. S. Cohen', written over a horizontal line.

William S. Cohen
Secretary of Defense

Attachment
As stated

PROPOSED COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM FOR VIEQUES

This community and economic development program, which has ten key elements and an estimated value of \$40 million, could be enacted upon continuous restoration of adequate use of the Vieques training range. Recognizing that some items on this list will require authorizing legislation, I propose the following:

1. Close the ammunition storage facility on the western end of the island and allocate part of the property for parkland and environmental preservation and designate the remainder (except the 100 acres needed for the radar and antenna sites) for use by the residents of Vieques.
2. Support the construction of a new commercial ferry pier and terminal by the Army Corps of Engineers, which has studied the proposal already. This would allow Vieques to proceed with plans for a new high-speed ferry service between Vieques and the main island, long a priority for local officials.
3. Complete the conveyance of 110 acres of Navy property to extend the runway at the Vieques Municipal Airport to accommodate larger passenger aircraft. In addition, the Navy would provide training and supplemental equipment to bolster the airport's fire, safety and rescue capability.
4. DoD would establish an artificial reef construction and fish aggregation program to create substantial new commercial fishing areas for Vieques fishermen. Until such time as these new fishing grounds are operational, Navy would authorize direct payment of an amount (to be determined by the National Marine Fisheries Service) to be paid to registered Vieques commercial fisherman for each day they are unable to use existing fishing waters because of Navy training.
5. Navy would support expanding or improving the major cross-island roadways and bridges on Vieques.

6. Navy would establish an apprenticeship-training program run by Navy Reserve Seabees (civil engineers) for young people on Vieques to facilitate participation in small-scale civic construction projects.
7. Navy would establish a program with the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico to preserve the Puerto Mosquito Vieques bioluminescent bay. One-third of this bay lies along Navy conservation zone coastline, and the Navy would commit resources to its preservation.
8. Navy would establish a professional economic development office on Vieques for the purpose of promoting Vieques and attracting jobs to the island. This office would work closely with Puerto Rico's Economic Development Administration.
9. DoD would fund a Public Health Service study in coordination with other appropriate agencies to review health concerns raised by residents of Vieques.
10. Steps would be taken to address local concerns about excessive noise during training exercises.